

Washington's Battle Over Syrian Foreign Policy: Will Hawks Or Doves Prevail?

By [Prof Peter Dale Scott](#)

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Like Putin's policy in Russia, Obama's Syrian policy is being tugged strenuously in Washington, both by hawks and by doves. On June 13, Obama handed two limited but ominous victories to the hawks: a finding of fact that the troops of Syria's president Bashar al-Assad "have used chemical weapons [i.e. sarin] against rebel forces," and a consequent decision "to begin supplying the rebels for the first time with small arms and ammunition."¹

Both announcements sound very strange, if not dishonest, to anyone who has been following the Syrian crisis. Deputy National Security Adviser Benjamin Rhodes, one of Obama's top foreign policy advisers, was quoted by the *New York Times* as saying that "there was no reason to think that the resistance has access to chemical weapons." Thus, like most of the mainstream U.S. media, Rhodes simply ignored the reports last May in the British media that "U.N. human rights investigators have gathered testimony from casualties of Syria's civil war and medical staff indicating that rebel forces have used the nerve agent sarin."² Three weeks later there were additional disputed reports that a 2kg cylinder with sarin gas had been seized from Syrian rebel forces in Turkey.³ We thus see another U.S. case, as a decade ago in Iraq, of policy steering intelligence, rather than vice versa.

The second announcement, that the U.S. would "begin supplying the rebels," is also hard to reconcile with reality. As the *Times* itself revealed three months ago, the CIA since early 2012 has helped facilitate an airlift of 3500 tons or more of arms to the rebels from Saudi Arabia and Qatar.⁴



Syrian rebels will receive new infusions of US arms

The role of Saudi Arabia and Qatar as cutouts reprises a pattern seen in Bosnia in 2003 and

especially Libya in 2011; and this history tells us that although Washington would prefer that the arms not reach Salafist jihadis, it will be difficult or impossible to stop this from happening.⁵ What is clear is that the new weapons will add to the slaughter without ending it – a slaughter that is ever more directed against civilians on all sides.⁶

With these small moves Obama has granted the hawks, like Republican Senator John McCain, far less than they wish. In the same announcement, Benjamin Rhodes “all but ruled out the option of a no-fly zone,” the no-boots-on-the-ground strategy that ousted Gaddafi in Iraq. By ruling out a no-fly zone, Obama may still hope to forestall a Russian move to supply Assad with advanced anti-aircraft missiles, a step almost certain to provoke Israeli involvement and perhaps a further expansion of the conflict into Lebanon and Iraq.

With the support of an Op-Ed in the *New York Times*,⁷ U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry met in early May with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, and the two agreed to reconvene an international conference by late May to deal with the Syrian crisis (at a time when an EU arms embargo was due to expire). The conference was, however, postponed and is still in doubt, largely because the west’s preferred clients in the uprising, the Free Syrian Army, refuse to participate while they are currently losing.

Kerry and Lavrov met again in Paris in late May, and the outcome this time was more ominous. Russian media still reported, with guarded optimism, about a prospective but delayed conference.⁸ American media however ignored or downplayed the conference notion. Instead they quoted a State Department spokesman Patrick Ventrell, who rebuked Moscow for announcing it would deliver an advanced guided S-300 anti-aircraft missile system to Syria; and he added that America would now support the easing of the EU arms embargo.

Two features of Obama’s Syrian policy, mutually offsetting, have been visible since he first took office. The first has been his extreme caution, and his refusal to rush into commitments like the one that has America currently bogged down in Afghanistan. The second has been a tendency to justify his delaying tactics by abstract policy statements fit only for headlines, as when in August 2011 he said categorically that Assad must “step aside.” He thus left himself with a policy position that Russia will not agree to, and no policy to make it happen.

Meanwhile, numerous informed American and international analyses of the Syrian crisis warn that the conflict, already a proxy war pitting Turkey and the Arabian peninsula countries against Iran, could become still larger and more dangerous.¹⁰ However, these reports tend to ignore the brute petroleum realities which are likely to determine Assad’s downfall, if they are not directly confronted and rebutted.

Syria’s petroleum reserves were estimated in 2010 at 2,500,000,000 barrels. More importantly, Syria is the most obvious land route for any pipelines to export oil and gas from the Persian Gulf, including Iran, to the energy-hungry nations of western Europe. But the Kirkuk-Baniyas crude oil pipeline, from the Kirkuk oil field in Iraq to the Mediterranean, was destroyed by U.S. air strikes in 2003 and never reopened.

In 2009 Qatar and Turkey began negotiating a new natural gas pipeline across Saudi Arabia and Syria to Turkey, to link up with the proposed Nabucco pipeline across Turkey from

Azerbaijan.¹¹ A route through Iraq seemed increasingly problematic, however, with the increasing conflicts there. Meanwhile, according to Oilprice.com, Saudi Arabia denied Qatar the use of its territory, leaving a route through southern Iraq and Syria for Qatar to “secure a new source of income. Pipelines are in place already in Turkey to receive the gas. Only Al-Assad is in the way.”¹²

The *Financial Times* has since reported that

The tiny gas-rich state of Qatar has spent as much as \$3bn over the past two years supporting the rebellion in Syria, far exceeding any other government.... its financial support for the revolution that has turned into a vicious civil war dramatically overshadows western backing for the opposition.¹³

The informed website ZeroHedge.com has commented that this considerable investment is “as so often happens in the middle east,... once again all about the natural resources.”¹⁴

Qatar’s North Dome gas field, in the middle of the Persian Gulf, is one with Iran’s South Pars field, and together they constitute the largest gas field in the world. In 2011 Assad rejected an ultimatum from Qatar and instead agreed with Iran and Iraq to build a new Iran-Syria pipeline which would transfer natural gas to the Mediterranean from Iran’s South Pars natural gas field rather than Qatar’s North Dome.¹⁵ (We should recall that similar challenges to American petrodollar hegemony were made by Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, with fatal consequences to them and their regimes.)¹⁶

As Pepe Escobar has commented,

The key (unstated) reason for Qatar to be so obsessed by regime change in Syria is to kill the \$10 billion Iran-Iraq-Syria [natural gas] pipeline, which was agreed upon in July 2011. The same applies to Turkey, because this pipeline would bypass Ankara, which always bills itself as the key energy crossroads between East and West.

It’s crucial to remember that the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline is ... anathema to Washington.... The difference is that Washington in this case can count on its allies Qatar and Turkey to sabotage the whole deal.¹⁷

One of the great downsides of covert foreign policies is that crucial world-changing decisions are entrusted to gung-ho cowboys with little oversight and still less interest in the long-term consequences of their disruptive actions. We saw this two decades ago when the CIA, overriding the State Department, helped Pakistan’s ISI, in collusion with the Salafist jihadi Hekmatyar, overthrow the relatively moderate Najibullah government in Afghanistan that had been left behind when the Soviets withdrew.¹⁸

Former Ambassador Peter Tomsen has written an eloquent memoir, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, about this under-acknowledged tragedy, out of which grew both 9/11 and a war America is still fighting:

Under Secretary for Political Affairs Robert Kimmitt and I tried to close the gap between the State Department and the CIA's Directorate of Operations on Afghan policy. I met twice with Deputy CIA Director Richard Kerr to resolve differences. But the agency persisted in backing the ISI's military attacks on Kabul aimed at replacing Najib[ullah] with Hekmatyar.... Separately, the State Department and the CIA were operating at cross purposes. That was a certain recipe for paralysis and ultimate policy failure.¹⁹

Unless there is a significant change, we can anticipate the same tragedy again in Syria — with the CIA, in collusion with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, facilitating arms to similar Sunni jihadis, while the State Department officials seek, with their Russian counterparts, a peaceful resolution to this crisis.

The alternative would be a timely reconvening of an international Geneva Conference, with or without the various rebel factions, and certainly with the participation of Qatar and two other countries excluded from the last such conference: Iran and Saudi Arabia. All these nations are already part of the conflict, and all these nations, like the rest of the world, have legitimate interests that would be better served by peace.²⁰

Peter Dale Scott, a former Canadian diplomat and English Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author of [Drugs Oil and War](#), [The Road to 9/11](#), and [The War Conspiracy: JFK, 9/11, and the Deep Politics of War](#). His most recent book is [American War Machine: Deep Politics, the CIA Global Drug Connection and the Road to Afghanistan](#). His website, which contains a wealth of his writings, is [here](#).

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Notes

¹ "U.S. Is Said To Plan To Send Weapons to Syrian Rebels," *New York Times*, June 14, 2013.

² [“U.N. has testimony that Syrian rebels used sarin gas: investigator,”](#) Reuters, May 5, 2013. Cf. [BBC](#), May 6, 2013,. At the time White House spokesman Jay Carney commented that, [“We are highly sceptical of any suggestions that the opposition used chemical weapons,”](#) (Guardian [London], May 6. 2013).

³ “Turkey finds sarin gas in homes of suspected Syrian Islamists – reports,” RT, May 30, 2013, <http://rt.com/news/sarin-gas-turkey-al-nusra-021/>.

⁴ C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, [“Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.,”](#) *New York Times*, March 24, 2013.

⁵ Peter Dale Scott, [““Bosnia, Kosovo, and Now Libya: The Human Costs of Washington’s On-Going Collusion with Terrorists,”](#) Asian-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, July 29, 2011. Cf. Jason M. Breslow, [“Can the U.S. Keep Its Weapons From Extremists in Syria?”](#) FRONTLINE, PBS, June 14, 2013: “As FRONTLINE reported in [The Battle for Syria](#), rebels in the country have grown [increasingly Islamist and extreme](#), prompting concern within the administration that U.S. weapons could fall into the wrong hands. The challenge ahead will be preventing such a scenario, a task most experts believe will be difficult if not impossible.”

⁶ Dana El Baltaji, [“Syria Rebels Threaten to Wipe Out Shiite, Alawite Towns,”](#) Bloomberg.com, May 21, 2013: “Communities inhabited by Shiite Muslims and President Bashar al-Assad’s Alawite minority will be ‘wiped off the map’ if the strategic city of Al-Qusair in central Syria falls to government troops, rebel forces said. ‘We don’t want this to happen, but it will be a reality imposed on everyone,’ Colonel Abdel-Hamid Zakaria, a spokesman for the Free Syrian Army in Turkey [the faction which Senator McCain met last month], told Al-Arabiya television yesterday. ‘It’s going to be an open, sectarian, bloody war to the end.’”

⁷ [Former Ambassador] Daniel C. Kurtzer, [“Obama Can’t Go It Alone in Syria,”](#) *New York Times*, May 2, 2013: “Constructing an international coalition of willing states — especially Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar — is the only strategically wise option for the United States. Without such a coalition, intervention won’t work. And without such a coalition, America must reject unilateral military intervention in Syria.”

⁸ “Take two: Lavrov, Kerry working to broker redo of Syria peace conference,”

RT, May 27, 2013.

⁹ [US supports EU easing of Syria arms embargo,”](#) *AFP*, May 28, 2013; *UPI*, May 29, 2013.

¹⁰ E.g. David Bromwich, [“Stay Out of Syria!”](#) *New York Review of Books*, June 20, 2013. M K Bhadrakumar poses the issue more starkly, with an eye toward U.S.-Russian conflict. “All in all, Obama’s momentous decision on military intervention in Syria, which could well launch a new Cold War, is a desperate diversionary move when his administration is caught up deep in the cesspool over the Snowden controversy.

The entire moral edifice on which Obama built up his presidency and the values he espoused at the core of his “audacity of hope” when he began his long march to the White House five years ago – transparency, accountability, legitimacy, multilateralism, consensus – lie exposed today as a pack of

lies.”“[Obama’s Monica Moment](#),” Asia Times June 14, 2013,

¹¹ [“Qatar seeks gas pipeline to Turkey,”](#) TheNational.ae, August 26, 2009 Cf. [PipelinesInternational.com](#), March 2010: “Turkey is in negotiations to discuss the development of the Qatar – Turkey pipeline. The pipeline would run from Doha to Istanbul, a distance of approximately 2,500 km. The pipeline would carry Qatari gas to the Mediterranean Sea, crossing Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria, and may link to the proposed Nabucco gas pipeline.”

¹² Felix Imonti, “Qatar: Rich and Dangerous,” Oilprice.com, September 17, 2012.

¹³ *Financial Times*, May 16, 2013.

¹⁴ [“Mystery Sponsor Of Weapons And Money To Syrian Mercenary “Rebels” Revealed,”](#) ZeroHedge.com, May 16, 2013.

¹⁵ [“Islamic Pipeline States Meet in Baghdad,”](#) *Tehran Times*, June 14, 2013.

¹⁶ Peter Dale Scott, [“The Libyan War, American Power and the Decline of the Petrodollar System,”](#) Asian-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, April 27, 2011.

¹⁷ Pepe Escobar, [“Iran, Pakistan, Syria, Qatar: Pipelineistan at work,”](#) RT, April 14, 2013.

¹⁸ A horror story: see Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 173-214.

¹⁹ Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, 422.

²⁰ Zbigniew Brzezinski has sensibly proposed that other nations with energy interests in the Persian Gulf, notably China and Japan, should also be invited to participate in the conference (PBS News, June 14, 2013).

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